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‘Hot’ Hart: an interview with Grant Hart



By Gregg Shapiro

Contributing writer

The impact that Husker Du had on the modern rock world of the 1980s is on par with that of R.E.M. and Sonic Youth. In fact, their influence can still be felt today. The fact that the trio from Minneapolis did it with two-thirds of the band members being gay is itself something to sing about.

Those men, Grant Hart (performing on Dec. 11 at Darkroom Bar, 2210 W. Chicago) and Bob Mould had vastly different solo career trajectories. The prolific Mould has remained an audible and visible force in music over the years. Hart, on the other hand, worked at an entirely different pace, with only three solo records to his name since Husker Du disbanded in 1987.

That said, Hart's solo albums are all unique creative expressions of his artistic being and perspective. As with the others, Hart's latest "Hot Wax" (Con D'Or/MVD) touches on a variety of musical styles, which is quite a feat considering there are only nine songs on the disc. Ranging in mood from the raw and rocking "You're The Reflection of the Moon

on the Water” to the playful queer pop of “California Zephyr” and “Charles Hollis Jones,” to mention a few, “Hot Wax” finds ways to warm the listener.

Gregg Shapiro: It's been 10 years between 1999's "Good News For Modern Man" and your new album "Hot Wax." Can you please say a few words about what you were doing during that time?

Grant Hart: I started recording in 2005, so it really wasn't 10 years. It was recorded at Hotel 2 Tango in Montreal, which was closed for nearly two years. I was losing interest in finishing the album because I embarked upon a compositional project that is very exciting. But I did spend a bit of time learning some things that I always wanted to know about. I did a frame-off restoration on a '62 Studebaker Hawk. I studied means of enhancing intuition and even experimented with magic and the healing arts.

GS: Were the songs for "Hot Wax" written all at once in a burst of creativity or were they written over the course of the 10 years between albums?

GH: Some of the songs were recorded soon after they were written. Others benefited from time between writing and recording. I always take all the time I can. The songs can always be improved.

GS: You are joined on "Hot Wax" by a stellar line-up of guest musicians including Efrim Menuck from Godspeed You Black Emperor! and Basia Bulat, to name a couple. What was involved in the process of selecting musicians to play with you on the disc?

GH: The people involved were in Montreal and were excited about me coming to town to record. They gave of themselves very unselfishly. Their connection to the (recording) studio was a big factor.

GS: Is that you playing the piano on "Barbara" and that psychedelic organ on "You're The Reflection of the Moon on the Water," "Charles Hollis Jones" and others?

GH: Yes, I am the organista!

GS: "You're The Reflection of the Moon on the Water" has a spiritual quality because of the source of the quote (a monk) to it but it also has a hint of sexuality too, as if it's being sung to a lover or an ex-lover. Am I reading more into it than is there?

GH: Sex has always been a major component of the songs I write, whether implied or on the surface. The meaning you suggest for “You're The Reflection of the Moon on the Water” is very valid.

GS: You also credit the style of the song to Patti Smith.

GH: Patti is the queen of Rock and Roll! Listen to (her song) “Rock and Roll Ni**er” and you will get what I mean.

GS: "School Buses Are For Children" opens with the lines "Airplanes can take you there/but sometimes just the air is not enough to keep you in the sky." As someone who gave up air travel in 1995, I was wondering if you also felt the same way about it as I do?

GH: Dying in a fire crash is not as terrifying (to me) as surrendering my freedom to some airline security dog, whether they are human beings or real dogs. The song is about the death of my friend Senator Wellstone, murdered by Dick Cheney and crew.

GS: I also love the literary, pop culture and art references in "Charles Hollis Jones," which sounds like a loving tribute to both Jones and Tennessee Williams. Can you please say something about that song?

GH: I met Charles Hollis Jones at a friend's home. He needed a song about him whether he knows it or not (laughs). After years of working with translucent materials, he found his own clarity. He designed a suite for Williams who gleefully let his boyfriends sit on the chairs with no pants on. No underpants either (laughs)! If that isn't rock and roll, I don't know what is...

GS: You are currently touring in support of the new disc. What do you like best about live performance and what do you like least about it?

GH: What I like most is being able to sing my songs to a handsome stranger. What I like least is noisy drunks and not getting a chance to talk to the handsome stranger afterwards.